

## S/A 4074: Ritual and Ceremony

### Lecture 6: The Phenomenological Approach to Ritual

\* Unlike the largely British tradition of earlier approaches, phenomenology is rooted in continental Europe

\* The phenomenological approach:

- (1) Exhibits a central focus on systematic comparison of myth (not ritual);
- (2) Critiques the “reductionism” of previous schools, arguing that myths are a form of understanding and scholars must explore the components of religious experience; and
- (3) Repudiates most attempts to determine the historical origins of religion and backs away from evolutionary approaches to explain their specific differences.

\* Phenomenologists attempt to develop methods of comparison by mapping religious phenomena in terms of underlying experiential patterns or structures.

\* Van der Leeuw (d. 1950) and Pettazoni (d.1959) identified two formal components of religion:

- (1) The common structural elements underlying all religious experience; and
- (2) The actual, particular forms that these have in practice

\* Comparative research enumerating the latter would eventually enable enumeration of the former

\* Questions arose whether these common experiential structures had independent existence (i.e. “The Sacred”), or they were merely cognitive

forms of the religious human mind (i.e. “Structures of consciousness”).

- \* The search for ahistorical universals enabled phenomenologists to abandon the worst excesses of evolutionism, but at the host of a truly historical framework.

- \* A major effect was to minimize the importance of ritual.

- \* Mircea Eliade (d.1986) gave primacy to religious myths over rituals: rituals were seen as secondary reworkings of mythic symbols - something less stable that cannot reveal what the symbol does.

- \* Eliade not only analyzes earlier views for what they reveal about human perception and cognition, but sees myths as telling a sacred story

- \* Sacred stories reveal the nature of the gods, how things came to be the way they are, provide exemplary models for all important human activities, and exemplify reality: an encounter with the sacred.

- \* Identification of human acts with the divine models in myth enables people to experience what is real and meaningful, to regenerate cyclical notions of time, and to renew the prosperity and fecundity of the community: “the ritual makes creation all over again.”

- \* While analytically the ritual may be dependent on the myth, in traditional societies with “living myths,” they are rarely separated. When they do separate, they become literature or art.

- \* Nevertheless, for the religious, myth as a matter of beliefs, symbols, and ideas are deemed a manifestation of the sacred inherently closer to people’s cognitive patterns, while ritual action is a mere secondary expression of them according to Eliade.

- \* Jonathan Z. Smith: historically specific rituals attempt to create broad patterns of order and meaning, including an emphasis on the situational

as much as the substantive aspects of ritual

\* Smith sees ritual as an opportunity to reflect on the disjuncture between what is and what ought to be: a “focusing lens” through which people can try to see, or argue for, what is significant in life.

\* Smith has focused phenomenology on religion as central to the cognitive need to understand, explain, order and adapt. Religious phenomena, including myth, must not be reduced to something else, but be seen as an integrated, interpretive phenomenon in experience

### **Mircea Eliade: Ritual and Myth:**

\* The Eliade reading for today exemplifies this approach in its focus on the symbolism of the centre

\* The centre represents a variety of things: the world axis, the place at which earth contacts heaven, the place of creation, etc.

\* This is illustrated through many diverse examples of sacred mountains, temples, palaces and cities, showing how each is somehow connected with creation, cosmic orientation, or the gods.

\* The centre is the “zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality.”

\* Creation, the gods, and absolute reality serve as models for human action. Ritual amounts to repetition of divine action, behind which lies an archetype - often creation, the beginning, the centre.

\* Myths thus often serve as models for ritual